



# If Not Now, When? Prioritizing Equity in Our Economic Recovery

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Last week, I traveled to Birmingham, Alabama, to meet with workers, community organizations and local officials and understand how the city is getting organized to center gender and racial equity as we emerge from the pandemic. We met with Mayor Randall Woodfin, who earlier this year launched an initiative – Embrace Mothers – aimed at supporting single moms with a \$375 monthly stipend over one year to ease their financial hardship and help offset the caregiving penalties they face as single parents in the workforce.

I got to meet Kimber Washington, who talked about the relief she felt to be part of the Embrace pilot program. “A lot of times my children watch themselves because I have to work. I’m working six, seven days a week,” she said. “Even though my home is paid for, I have student loans. I have homeowner’s insurance. I have car insurance, maintenance, medical insurance, doctor bills.”

Kimber echoed the sentiments of the other pilot program participants, all of whom shared what it meant to have just a little breathing room in the household budget, a little support to handle some of the financial challenges heightened by the pandemic.



***Wendy Chun-Hoon (front center) poses with other roundtable participants in Alabama.***

That conversation with Kimber and the other women I met in Birmingham reinforced the fundamental issue we’re working to address in this moment at local and federal levels: how we can continue to center equity for those most impacted by the pandemic to ensure their financial recovery and overall wellbeing.

At the height of the pandemic, millions of women left the labor force, in large part because of the difficulties they faced balancing caregiving responsibilities and work. While the economy has rebounded for most, as of June, the employment rate among mothers of kids under 13 was still down 1.6%. Black mothers’ employment is still 4.8% below February 2020 levels.

Within families, the burden of caregiving falls predominantly on women. Women who are employed full time outside of the home are expected to shoulder huge child and elder care expenses to ensure the kind of coverage they need to stay connected to their jobs. Too often, they are forced to change jobs, cut back their work hours, or exit the workforce entirely to be able to provide the necessary care to children or aging parents. At times, they must postpone career advancement because they know the opportunity will interfere with their ability to take care of loved ones. In essence, women’s outsized role as their families’ primary caregivers creates a wage penalty that’s often hard to recover.

As we know, women are concentrated in many of the lowest paying, lowest quality jobs. While care for our kids, loved ones with disabilities and elders is invaluable, the work of caregivers is systematically devalued. In fact, childcare workers receive among the lowest wages of any occupation and are more than twice as likely to live below the poverty line. In the U.S., 95% of all childcare workers are women, and most of them are women of color.



***Wendy Chun-Hoon listens to Kimber Washington speak at a roundtable in Alabama.***

As we also know, too many higher-wage industries and occupations still present barriers to women's entry. Although women comprise half the country's workforce, they represent barely 4% of the construction workforce, an industry that is poised to create thousands of good-paying jobs to rebuild our country's infrastructure using funds appropriated in last year's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

Our recent report, *Bearing the Cost: How Overrepresentation in Undervalued Jobs Disadvantaged Women During the Pandemic*, offers an in-depth analysis of the effects of this occupational segregation on women. For Black women in Alabama, the systemic relegation to low-pay, low-quality jobs amounts to an estimated \$1.3 billion annually in lower

wages compared to their white male counterparts.

Given this reality, I was excited to co-host the Women in Manufacturing program with Jobs to Move America while I was in Birmingham. Through their work winning Community Benefits Agreements, JMA is creating pipelines for women to enter good, family-sustaining manufacturing jobs. I met Sandy, who said that earning higher wages at the manufacturing plant was having a positive impact on her family's bottom line. She also shared how her union supported her when she experienced harassment on the job.

In this moment, as we invest billions of dollars in cities and states, we have a significant opportunity to create more equitable outcomes for women and people of color. Just as Birmingham is doing, we are encouraging mayors, state lawmakers, workers and organizers to focus American Rescue Plan and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act funding on strategies proven to support women's economic success. That includes expanding access to paid leave; ensuring child, elder and disability care is more affordable; increasing the wages and benefits of our care workforce; and creating pathways for women to enter careers in infrastructure and historically male-dominated fields, including through apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs that provide robust supportive services like childcare – an important consideration for women when they elect to enter or stay in a job.

These measures may be the only effective way to ensure an economic future that truly safeguards the wellbeing of women and their families.

*Wendy Chun-Hoon is the director of the U.S. Department of Labor's Women's Bureau. Follow the Women's Bureau on Twitter at @WB\_DOL.*

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